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Russell Patterson
University of Pennsylvania

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Donald F. Patterson



in memoriam

Donald F. Patterson, DVM, DSc

Emeritus Professor of Medicine and Medical Genetics, University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine and Emeritus Professor of Human Genetics, University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine

Donald F. Patterson, considered by many to be the father of veterinary genetics, passed away on June 8 in Seattle, Washington. Don was born in Venezuela in 1931 and grew up in Oklahoma and Texas, graduating from the Oklahoma State University College of Veterinary Medicine in 1954. After veterinary school, he completed an internship at Angell Memorial Animal Hospital in Boston and then served a tour of duty in the Air Force, where he was assigned Chief of Laboratory Services at Holloman Air Force Base in New Mexico. As a veterinary researcher, he was in charge of obtaining young chimps from West Africa and training them as research subjects. One of these charges, named Ham, was the first chimp to complete a suborbital space flight in 1961.

After his time in the Air Force, Dr. Patterson took a position at the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine as an instructor in cardiology, where he helped conduct the first NIH-supported research to identify and characterize genetic defects in cardiac development in the dog. In 1966, Don became Founder of the Penn Veterinary Medical Genetics Clinic, and in 1971, became the Founder and Chief of the Section of Medical Genetics at Penn Vet – the first academic subdivision devoted to medical genetics in a school of veterinary medicine. From 1985 to 2000, Don served as Principal Investigator for the Veterinary School Referral Center for Animal Models of Human Genetic Disease, and in 1995, he became Founder and Director of the Center for Research in Comparative Medical Genetics – both the first such NIH-supported centers at a veterinary school. The full scope of his professional discoveries, firsts, and awards, along with his influence at Penn Vet and the larger veterinary and medical genetics community are legion and would take up far more than the space allotted here. Dr. Patterson retired in 2000 after 42 years at Penn.

These impressive accomplishments aside, Dr. Patterson was a witty and humorous father of two and a husband who enjoyed a good cowboy joke or pun, and loved to canoe and fish. With his first wife, Nancy, and his boys by his side, he voyaged into the Boundary Waters of Minnesota, ran the rapids of the Chattooga River, and fished the remote lakes of Quebec. The family fondly recalls the typical response Don received when asking the locals for fishing advice: “You should have been here last week!”

Don was married to Nancy Hankins Patterson for 37 years until her death from breast cancer in 1990. Most of that time was spent living in Wallingford, Pennsylvania, where together they worked as a team to welcome countless colleagues, residents, visiting professors, and other academics from far and wide into their home. Nancy and Don had two children: Russell H. Patterson, who attended the University of Pennsylvania for undergraduate studies and Penn Vet (Class of '84), and is board-certified in surgery, operating a group veterinary surgical practice in Seattle, Washington; and Wade D. Patterson, who has a BA in Anthropology and a MA in Folklore and Folklife from the University of Pennsylvania, and is Executive Director of the Sawmill Community Land Trust in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Don is survived by Russell and Wade, by his grandchildren, Riley, Clay, Milo, and Ada, and by his current wife, Moyra Smith.

— RUSSELL PATTERSON, V'84